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Teachers' perception of the culture of physical education: Investigating the silences at Hana Primary School

Jinhee Kim and Andrew Taggart

[Edith Cowan University](#)

The purpose of this study was to explore teachers' perceptions of physical education classes in an urban Korean primary school. Furthermore, this study tried to interpret how teachers' beliefs were reflected in their teaching. One primary school with seventeen teachers was selected as the site for a case study. Data were collected by participant observation, informal interviews and field notes. Inductive analysis was used to organise the data throughout the research process. Three factors emerged that characterised teachers' perceptions of physical education: the low status of the physical education program, teachers' disengagement with the subject matter, and their lack of pedagogical knowledge. It was concluded that primary school teachers have a very limited view of their responsibilities for implementing physical education programs and seem to be part of the sustainable silences ascribed to physical education classes in primary schools.

Introduction

'The crisis in public education' is considered to be widespread in South Korean education. The 'crisis' suggests what is known as 'the loss of the class' (Korea Institute Curriculum and Evaluation, 2002; Ministry of Education & Human Resources Development, 2001). The 'loss of the class' is the state in which students do not follow the teacher's instructions and behave badly (KICE, 2002). This loss implies that some schools have lost both the educational purpose and meaning for teachers and students alike.

The 'loss of the class' is particularly evident in physical education in primary schools where teachers of physical education typically give their students little or no instruction while allowing them to have free play or other non-physical activities during the time allocated to physical education (Kim, 2003; You, 2002). Although teachers of the traditional core subjects (particularly maths, Korean, English, science) do not experience the 'loss of the class' to the same extent, primary teachers of physical education face the 'loss' on a frequent basis. They struggle to engage students with developmentally appropriate activities, and as a result students fail to achieve key physical education outcomes. The lack of engagement of students with physical education reflects a subject with marginal status.

Traditionally, physical education in Korean primary schools has had two major problems that form the basis of the current educational crisis. Firstly, physical education has been replaced by break time, school event preparation, and by other subjects seen as more important. Physical education is thus rarely taught in primary schools (Kim, 2002; You, 2002). Secondly, in primary schools, teachers do not appear to take physical education seriously; they do not value its potential contribution to a child's development, have a limited instructional focus and do not teach classes based on the content presented by the prescribed textbook (MEHRD, 2001). While some teachers regard physical

education as time for free play, others do not even come to the classroom (or playground) while students themselves prepare for and implement the class.

Despite the fact that physical education has been regarded as a core subject since the first national curriculum drafted in 1955, this documentation has not controlled the teaching of physical education in primary schools. If taught, physical education is often implemented as it was thirty or forty years ago (KICE, 2002; Son, 2002; You, 2002). Moreover, teachers typically teach the same activities, such as the dodge ball or soccer, to students of all years. With an aging workforce, amongst those few teachers who previously taught physical education, many have lost interest in teaching physical education due to the large class sizes and a poor work environment (Choi, 2002; Kim & Shin, 2001).

To respond to the 'loss of the physical education class', this study investigates how the teachers perceive the culture of physical education in their primary school. The culture of the class refers to the social, psychological and pedagogical characteristics evident in the physical education setting. The culture of physical education is influenced by both the constraints of history, and school structures factors that are often given tacit consent. Freire (1987) identified a phenomenon that silence or tacit agreement was maintained in the group/school staff for a long time, and called it "the culture of silence". In the culture of silence, according to Freire, teachers are unable to change their environment and subsequently follow the existing ideology, thus leading a passive form of professional life. This construct appears to be particularly relevant to a case study of a marginal subject such as physical education.

This paradoxical situation occurs frequently in physical education in the primary school, where teachers do not generally teach physical education except in such cases as school sports (Korea Sport Science Institute, 2001). To understand school settings and the life of teachers in these contexts, it is important to understand teacher's beliefs and feelings to determine why this crisis of physical education continues. Research through direct observation of the class and interviews with teachers is one way to investigate this phenomenon.

This study aims to understand the culture of primary physical education classes. For this purpose, it attempts to understand what teachers' perceptions of the classes are, what their beliefs are, and how their classes are taught. Furthermore, this study tries to interpret how teachers' beliefs are reflected in their teaching, and to consider what kind of self reflection is necessary for teachers to be able to commit themselves to the teaching of physical education.

Method

1. Participants and setting

This case study of school physical education was conducted at a government school, Hana Primary. Purposive sampling was used for the selection of the participants in this study, in accordance with the research theme, with 17 of the 30 teachers willingly involving themselves in the study.

Hana Primary School has a transient student population of approximately 1200 students and is located in an industrial complex. The 3rd, 4th, 5th, and 6th grades, along with the 17 teachers (seven male and ten female) who agreed to participate, were the data sources for the study. The teachers' experience ranged from 9 to 16 years. Class sizes were typically about forty students.

To understand the culture of silence in physical education classes, this study used a case method of ethnography. Participant observation was chosen as it was seen to have the advantage of enabling data collection as well as helping to form closer working relationships with the participants. Prior to the study the senior author had been working as a teacher at Hana and had formed positive professional relationships with her colleagues. Since the researcher was seen as a Hana teacher, it was possible to approach colleagues, to collect and discuss data so as to maximise the quality of field observations.

Initially one researcher had a meeting with teachers and explained the merits and purpose of the research. Most of the participants were positive about the research, though it was more difficult to gain permission from the older and more experienced teachers. In recognition of their participation, some teachers asked for curriculum assistance, which the researcher gladly accommodated (e.g. computer help; PE resources). The teachers, who willingly agreed to be observed, were confident in their teaching, and didn't feel any great burden about being part of the study, as it was seen as not having anything to do with the State education office. Also, they were willing to share their own teaching experiences with peers, and were pleased to receive feedback about their teaching.

The fieldwork was conducted for a total of 60 hours comprising 90 observed physical education classes during a 20-week semester. The physical education classes that were taught were generally of 40 minutes duration. All grades (3-6) were required (State documentation) to have three lessons per week, with the equivalent of 56 instructional hours per semester. The teachers observed taught less than half the requirement, with a range of 16-24 instructional hours occurring.

2. Data collection

To better understand factors of the school environment, especially the interaction of participants, field based research has been suggested (Dyson & O'Sullivan, 1998). The main sources of data for this study were participant observation, field notes, informal interviews and journals. All teachers (n=17) were interviewed early in the study to provide a broader understanding of the culture of physical education in the teacher's class. In depth interviews were conducted at the beginning (Week 1/2; n=17) and end of the study with interested volunteers (Week 20; n=4). The interviews with teachers were typically made in the classroom or playground and were audio recorded. The final interview was a group session with four teachers and was completed after their school day. A journal, which the principal researcher wrote freely during the research period, was used as reference data to consciously reveal the viewpoint of the researcher.

Student interviews were also conducted and involved groups of 5 or 6 students after the observed lesson and lasted for approximately 10 minutes. Interviews were conducted to obtain the students' perceptions of the lesson and their thinking and feelings about their recent physical education class.

3. Data analysis and trustworthiness

The challenge of qualitative research is to make sense of the massive amounts of raw data (Guba, 1981). Therefore, in order to prevent this potential problem, a systematic interpretive approach was utilised to carefully reduce the amount of data and subsequently to develop inductively the themes that would assist in understanding the teachers' perceptions of PE.

The research tool used was Spradley's (1980) descriptive observation frame. Data from field notes, interviews and journals were analysed following the 12 steps of the developmental research sequence suggested by Spradley. Firstly, the researcher started with an analysis of the descriptive observations to gain an overview of the class culture and then completed a domain analysis to establish specific themes present. Secondly, a category system of analysis was inductively derived; categories that arose frequently were combined to form themes. Thirdly, the teacher's perceptions of physical education teaching, based on the interviews, were merged with the field notes to inform the findings. This provided triangulation of data sources that strengthened the findings and supported the trustworthiness of the data.

Two member checks were carried out. The first consisted of returning all field notes and interview transcripts to teachers to modify or clarify any aspects of the data. Only editorial, and semantic changes were made. Peer debriefing was also used to assist in analysing and interpreting the data. It consisted of inviting other researchers to challenge both the interpretations of the data and methodological procedures adopted. More specifically, meetings were scheduled weekly with a faculty member and a doctoral student to complete this audit.

4. The researcher

This study was initiated from the empirical critical perspective focusing on the reality of physical education from both teacher and researcher perspectives. The researcher was concerned about the quality of physical education and while watching the 'sad state' of physical education demonstrated at Hana and agonised over unchanged practices of past times. "Even when I was transferred to another school, I found that the same thing occurred. The agony of this situation made me realise the in-depth problems facing physical education" (Researcher journal, pp.43-47; Kim, 2001) and so the research was undertaken from the perspective of a shared life with peers.

As more time was spent in the Hana as a researcher, the problem appeared to grow. When working at Hana Primary School, the senior researcher formed a close relationship with peers, and without their support believed that she could not begin to understand their reality as class teachers of physical education. The authors believe that quality physical education can be implemented in schools if physical education goals are better understood, valued and seen by all stakeholders as contributing to the holistic development of children.

Findings and discussion

The data from the range of sources were collected from extensive fieldwork of 90 classes totaling 60 hours of observed physical education classes. The data were analysed and resulted in the generation of three major themes identified as: the low status of physical education program; teacher's disengagement with the subject matter; and their lack of pedagogical content knowledge.

1. The low status of the physical education program

The low status of physical education at Hana School is considered from two perspectives/sub-themes: program implementation and institutional causes.

Program implementation

Data indicates that the teaching of physical education was of low status (Table 1.). The national curriculum in Korea mandates three lessons per week for a total of 51 hours per 17 week semester. Teachers at Hana taught PE less than half the mandated time.

Table 1: Implementation of PE at Hana School

Grade	Implemented lesson hours/semester
3	24
4	16
5	25
6	25
Mean	22.5

While most teachers taught little physical education, some still had a rhetoric that defended the importance of the subject.

Ever since I have taught I feel that PE is important for students in primary school. Children need to be active. It prepares them for various activities that they will encounter throughout school. I know many teachers fail to support the PE class. We need to support PE to the greatest extent possible. (Interview, Teacher Jo.)

While many teachers teach little physical education, they typically prefer to emulate very traditional methods, similar to ones they would have experienced as students, rather than try to adopt new ones. They also have a view that physical education can only be performed in the playground in the traditional form of games or fitness activities. Physical education is always performed in the playground. Teachers conduct physical education in classroom once or twice each year. They make students underline the important points in the textbook, which reflects the insincere attitudes of teachers toward physical education. (Interview, Teacher Mun) Mun's perception of physical education, like that of others, reflects not only the thoughts of teachers but also those of school administrators, students and parents. This reflects a perception that physical education is simply education of the physical. Physical education is not seen as an important part of holistic growth and so teachers frequently replace physical education with other subjects.

A mother asked her child to take a rest during a physical education class because she was sick. Then the teacher let her to do so without asking why. (Field note, May 18, 2001)

At teacher meetings the administrators coerce the teachers to replace physical education by other subjects. (Interview, Teacher Park)

It appears that students, parents and administrators all believe that physical education classes may be skipped, as they are not important. They overlook or neglect the fact that physical education is part of the prescribed curriculum and see physical education performed as physical activity, education of the physical. This distorted perception of the nature of physical education not only reflects the perceptions of teachers, administrators and students but it also reinforces parents' views as they see physical education being taught the same way it was in their school days. Teachers passively react to this environment and so have little desire to change their practices.

Fellow teachers also have prejudice about physical education. For example, they say that physical education is giving a ball to students and conducting a practical test. (Interview, Teacher Park)

Similar studies in western countries show that negative perceptions by teachers are a problem for the delivery of quality physical education in schools (Taggart, 1995; Sparkes, 1988; Kirk & George, 1988). The interviews with students reveal that students have similar views to their teachers, and associate physical education with the traditions of primary school physical education established 20 years ago, where non-instructional soccer, basketball, dodge ball and foot baseball were the typical offerings.

Giving students more free time during class is the best physical education. I love to play soccer, and the teacher always let us play soccer. That's why physical education only reminds me of soccer. (Interview, Student Lee)

Many researchers have discussed the view that physical education is a marginal subject (Kirk, 1996; O'Sullivan, Siedentop, & Tannehill, 1994; Taggart, 1989). Although this view has been reluctantly discussed, researchers agree that all engaged in physical education are responsible for its perceived marginality and should cooperate to change the situation (Housner, 1996; Kirk, 1996; Rovegno & Bandhauer, 1997). Rovegno & Bandhauer (1997) point out that changing the teachers' perceptions is essential for the operation of quality physical education programs. They suggested that teachers should escape from the physical education teaching practices of the past and positively accept new methodologies, despite the difficulty of change, in order to improve programs and outcomes for students. Teacher educators face similar challenges as they attempt to engage classroom teachers in the implementation of quality physical education in schools. National curriculum documents continue to fail to control the delivery of quality physical education in schools, while innovative, student centred curriculum models (Alexander and Taggart, 1995) may engage more primary school teachers with physical education.

Institutional causes

Physical education in primary schools has a limited impact on the Korean educational system. Korean society places great pressure on students to achieve academically, leading to an emphasis on what is regarded as the "more important" subjects. An early focus on university entrance examination, with private tutoring being engaged for many 5-year olds, has a negative influence on the performance of physical education from several perspectives.

The subjects related to the university entrance are of importance to students. The enthusiasm for the entrance to a good university has influenced the students even in the primary schools. So several subjects considered important for the university entrance examination are intensively taught in the

primary schools. As a result, students prefer physical education to be easy-going (exercise is not necessary), and they do not have a chance to experience learning various subjects. (Interview, Teacher Jang)

Teachers find it difficult to teach their class that has often more than 40 students. However, apart from the class teaching, teachers are often asked to complete various administrative assignments even if it requires to be sacrificed in order to complete the assignment. (Interview, Teacher Son)

The problem of physical education is due partly to the educational system. The problem cannot be attributed to teachers only. Currently, the university entrance examination has a great influence on every aspect of school education. Subjects that are not related to the university entrance examination secure less attention from administrators, students, and parents. As a result, teachers who do not teach those subjects well are not punished.

It is quite common that physical education teachers let students do free play in the belief that it will relieve them of the stress so that they can work better on core subjects. As such, physical education has been regarded for several decades as a subject that is not important. Teachers have not taught physical education but let students play on the playground. (Interview, Teacher Jeong) The strong emphasis on academic achievement in primary schools reflects a limited view of schooling and associated outcomes for children. Physical education as stress reduction, while being a very limited view of the potential benefits of a quality health and physical education program, may in fact lead, paradoxically, to some educators seeing the value of physical education in Korean primary schools.

With the focus on university entrance from the primary school level the low status attributed to physical education in Korean schools is perhaps understandable. At Hana the low status of physical education reflected deeper national and state issues that impact on the delivery of quality physical education in primary schools. New policies that engage administrators and teachers must be developed to improve both the perception and implementation of physical education curriculum.

Research by Anderson (1994) identified six schools that were managing the curriculum of physical education well, showing that these schools have support at policy and administrative levels. The principals supported physical education financially and encouraged teachers to positively participate in the administrative operations of physical education. Dyson & O'Sullivan (1998) and Cothran (2001) found that the marginal subjects need support from a range of forces to overcome entrenched institutional problems.

2. Teachers' disengagement with the subject matter

Teachers' disengagement with physical education often reflects both the lack of priority it is given by educators, and also their subsequent lack of understanding of the curriculum and pedagogies of physical education. Both internal and external factors contributing to the lack of engagement were identified at Hana.

Internal factors at the school level

The class teachers at Hana were not confident talking about the physical education curriculum or the delivery of the program. They showed a lack of concern for the students in physical education and had little motivation to improve or change their teaching.

Physical education is the last thing to change. Since I was appointed 12 years ago, I have taught students in the same way. I have repeated the same contents over and over. Like other teachers, I have not shown any interest in collecting new information. I do not feel like doing it because no one else does it. Is it because we don't have any educational philosophy? (Teacher Oh)

The teachers' perceptions of their powerlessness, in the teaching of physical education, are contributing to the "loss of the class". While the teachers were not explicitly 'against PE' they reflected both curriculum and pedagogical disengagement.

As such, physical education has been regarded for several decades as a subject that is not important. Teachers have not taught physical education but let students play on the playground (Interview, Teacher Jeong). Kirk & George (1988) suggested that the fixed preconception of physical education is that it is recreational in nature and this in turn prevented the actualisation of the educative value of physical education. This disengagement was prevalent at Hana and in other Korean settings (KICE, 2002; You, 2002).

Students also adopted the disengaged attitude of their teachers and highlighted other issues impacting on the delivery of PE.

I've only had female teachers for 6 years. They gave us a ball in the physical education class or sometimes taught different subjects in the physical education class. Some students would ask a teacher why she did not let us play. As time went by, we thought that since our teacher was a woman, she could not teach the physical education class. (Interview, Student Kim)

Teachers' disengagement with physical education impacts negatively on the physical education of their students. Teachers' lack of passion and their limited reflective abilities are intrinsic factors that were highlighted at Hana and in other studies (Anderson, 1994; Cothran, 2001; Rovegno & Bandhauer, 1997). Teachers at Hana believe they can improve their physical education classes, but at the present time there are too many internal factors to overcome and thus they believe the current trend of "the loss of the class", the physical education class, will continue.

External factors

The inferior facilities and equipment that are evident where physical education is implemented in schools contributed to the Hana Primary teacher's disengagement with PE. Because the learning environment for physical education is very poor, teachers express few approaches to engaging with the physical education subject matter.

I guess poor facilities is the realistic restraint. I guess I am too talkative. Above all, we regret that 40 students are crammed in the narrow playground. If they are teachers in Korea, this situation is natural. It can be an excuse of teachers who neglect teaching properly the physical education class. (Interview, Teacher Kang)

I have been here for 5 years, but there hasn't been any new equipment coming in for the physical education. We have only small portion of the expendable articles or several iron bars with the paint. Those are all we have at the moment. We can't scold children, as they don't want to exercise on the dirty mattress. (Interview, Teacher So)

Reducing class sizes and providing better facilities and equipment have long been called for at Hana. To improve school physical education both the education authority and school community must work to improve the quality and quantity of the physical education facilities and equipment. This lack of adequate resources for physical education is common in other Korean schools and has significantly contributed to many teachers lack of motivation and their subsequent disengagement with physical education (KICE, 2002; Kim, 2003). While in some schools with highly motivated teachers and children, these external factors can be overcome, little is likely to change at Hana if resource changes are not made.

3. Pedagogical knowledge

Teachers' pedagogical knowledge influences their perception of physical education in the primary school. Teachers at Hana did not willingly share the knowledge of physical education or their preferred teaching method with peers. There was almost total silence in this regard. It appears that teacher reflection on their teaching of PE was only stimulated by the researcher's questions.

Unshared knowledge

Teachers did not share their knowledge with peers and followed this practice of silence at Hana throughout the study. This practice of not sharing their knowledge and ideas or reflecting on their teaching with the view to improvement appears to have been deeply rooted in their professional practices.

We didn't have any debate on the physical education. We had experience in punishing students or giving them discipline. We mentioned over dodge ball and soccer. Ö For the past 9 years, we have never talked about what we teach and in what manner we teach except for the evaluation method. Most teachers shared the contents or resources for the Korean language and mathematics class, but not the physical education class. (Interview, Teacher Choi)

With this silence and the subsequent prevalence of individualism and the privatisation of their work, teachers are collectively deprived of the opportunity to know whether their class is effectively taught or properly managed. Each teacher's pedagogy depends entirely on their own sense of 'what works for them'. Although this situation exists at times for other subjects, it was particularly evident for physical education. Ward & Douts (1999) claimed that teachers should change the absence of their accountability by sharing their activities, theoretical and moral insights with each other so that they may improve their teaching of physical education.

I experienced several transfers. The atmosphere of the teachers' circle has a great effect on this. (Most teachers at) the school I work at usually do not teach physical education, yet almost no one talks about it. I try to teach the physical education class in the right way, but I get annoyed sometimes following the standard curriculum regulations alone. Although I know everybody has his own teaching method I feel the need to discuss with other teachers about teaching methodology, I usually do not mention it. I think it is a sensitive matter. (Interview, Teacher Son)

According to Fullan (1993), individualism is a common trait among teachers. Teachers, particularly in physical education, focus on their own classes and do not interfere with others' classes. At Hana the administrative work is made public but the teaching practices are not revealed. Several researchers (Anderson, 1994; Dyson & O'Sullivan, 1998; Rovegno & Bandhauer, 1997) have indicated that in the

"separate/privatised" climate, cooperation between teachers is necessary for improvements in teaching of the class. They argued that teachers should share existing effective practices, new information and their beliefs about teaching children. The complex demands of teaching physical education suggest that the silences are counter-productive and that physical education programs will benefit when performed within cooperative learning communities. At Hana there is a need for the re-culturing of PE and the work of teachers, rather than restructuring, which changes only the external organisations (Fullan, 2001). For the teachers this re-culturing should see the imitation of their practices in other subjects where, from time to time, they share their work, are held accountable for the implementation of the program by administrators, and allocate the required time afforded to each subject.

Unchanged knowledge

This study indicated that teachers had a lack of knowledge about physical education. Regardless of the teachers' experience, in terms of years spent teaching, only two teachers at Hana had participated in the school's in-service education program in physical education. This was significantly different to other subject areas. Lack of opportunity for professional development and teacher age were the common issues raised by Hana teachers as reasons for not meeting the physical education curriculum requirements.

I have been trained five times in the in-service program for Korean language and science subjects, but I have participated in the physical education program only once during my tenure of 13 years. The program was about the gymnastics and jump roping. However, I couldn't keep up with the training as it was dealing with practical skills. After finishing the program, I didn't apply it in the actual class. As I am becoming older, I am afraid to participate in this kind of training program again. (Interview, Teacher Jeong)

Hana teachers believed that the opportunity to undertake in-service education was an important factor in improving their teaching. However participation in the very few in-service education experiences offered in physical education did not appear to contribute to or improve physical education programs or the teacher's pedagogical knowledge.

I took a program that teaches how we can focus on the class of physical education or how different the class nowadays is from the one in the past. The program was mainly about the trend that the teacher-centred traditional class is changed . . . and that now the class is more student-centred. However, I would like to ask how many classes teachers actually teach like this. (Interview, Teacher Oh)

Like teacher Oh, other teachers in this study often saw innovation, as described in in-service programs, as being unachievable. Moving from teacher to student centred pedagogies proves to be challenging for most physical education teachers, and in-service courses are unlikely to move teachers beyond surface level change (Sparkes, 1990). Cutner-Smith (1999) supported this view and reported that physical education teachers in England, undergoing extensive in-service education on the national curriculum physical education course, failed to change their knowledge and beliefs. Although a new and innovative physical education course was established, the existing pedagogy was still prevalent in the field. It was difficult to expect "real change" with teachers when they

continued to maintain the individualistic, passive, and accommodating attitudes within a culture of silence, as was the case at Hana.

Conclusion

The life of a teacher at Hana primary school was complex due to a range of internal and external factors impacting on the curriculum and those charged with its delivery. The teachers' perceptions of physical education at primary school were consistently negative and somewhat forlorn. The teachers' cultures that related to physical education reflected a low status program with major deficiencies, disengagement with the subject matter, and a lack of pedagogical content knowledge. These cultures were recognisable at both individual and institutional levels, had remained unchanged over time, and reflected teachers operating in silent isolation. The teachers' perceptions of physical education at Hana are varied. They perceive physical education to be unimportant, difficult to teach, with large class size and poor resources in both equipment and access to 'new' physical education programs and pedagogies.

One problem deeply entrenched at Hana Primary School and in the Korean school system in general, is that physical education is viewed as unimportant. The teachers of physical education were generally individualistic, passive, and unaccommodating towards change, and when implementing physical education they silently followed traditional practices.

Although subtle, it appears the physical education class culture reflected the values and beliefs of the teachers. Given that the emphasis for improving physical education has typically been linked to both the commitment and reflective ability of the teachers (Anderson, 1994; Cothran, 2001; Rovegno & Bandhauer, 1997), the results of this study point toward the need for institutional and school based changes within a framework of changing teacher beliefs. The internal change of teachers, their beliefs in the value of physical education to children's development, should be a focus for the improvement of physical education at Hana Primary School. When the teachers' perceptions change, within a supportive educational setting, the culture of the physical education teaching may be less silent and the class may take a different form.

Those who advocate that the will of the teachers is crucial and that teachers just need to teach better, as the most important requirements for the improvement of physical education in schools, have most likely spent little time working or teaching in a school like Hana. Teachers at Hana faced a range of hurdles that mitigated against the implementation of physical education, let alone the effective teaching of the subject. New programs and pedagogies may hold some hope for improved physical education in Korean schools, but the institutional hurdles are very big and will require more than the will of a teacher or what a national curriculum can offer, if students are to acquire fundamental movement skills, and enjoy a physically active and healthy lifestyle.

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Authors: Dr Jinhee Kim was a Post-doctoral scholar, funded by the Korean Research Foundation, in the School of Education at Edith Cowan University, Western Australia, during 2003. In 2004 she was the Chief Investigator for an international comparative study of the implementation of the innovative curriculum model, sport education in physical education program, in primary and secondary schools and teacher education institutions. Dr Jinhee Kim, Senior Research Fellow, Secondary Education Institute, Teacher's College, Kyungpook National University, Daegu 702-701, South Korea. Email: pedakim@knu.ac.kr

Associate Professor Andrew Taggart is Director of Research and Higher Degrees and the Sport and Physical Activity Research Centre (SPARC) in the School of Education at Edith Cowan University. Email: a.taggart@ecu.edu.au

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HTML: Clare McBeath [\[c.mcbeath@bigpond.com\]](mailto:c.mcbeath@bigpond.com) and Roger Atkinson [\[rjatkenson@bigpond.com\]](mailto:rjatkenson@bigpond.com)